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Chapter Seventeen: Zara and David VIII

This is the story of my demise.

Such a cliché line. I feel dirty just having used it. How awful, I can't think of anything better. Not a single sentence that sounds better comes to mind, and that just proves how exceedingly mediocre of a

writer I am. No, I don't even qualify as a writer. A writer at least knows the rules to consider when telling a story. I don't, I don't understand any of that, I just write out of... out of sheer inertia, nothing more. Here I am once again, pretending to be an artist, with the faint hope that someone will ever read this.

Once, alone, seeking refuge in a countryside cottage in the dead of winter, freezing to death, I made a fire. I sheltered from the cold in a room akin to a study, filled with documents and apparent works of various kinds. I remember opening a drawer, taking a handful of handwritten notes, and using them to fuel the fire that kept me from perishing that night.

How ironic it would be if...

. . .

October, 2022

I don't recall ever being under such intense rain. My uniform was so drenched

it felt like it doubled my body weight. Walking was agonizing, and running was torture.

Trento, Italy. We were trekking among hills and rivers, treading puddles that could easily have been mistaken for lakes.

It was a defense mission that went to hell sooner rather than later. We were ordered to fortify the defense of a base housing a certain regiment of the Italian armed forces until reinforcements arrived. Reinforcements that never came.

For reasons you'll understand later, I never found out what really went wrong, or why we never received the support we expected. I just remember being promised a quiet night, but we had to stay alert. We knew about that storm in advance, so the sentinels had been instructed to remain on guard within their respective posts.

We weren't calm. We never were during those types of operations. It wasn't too late at night, so no one was asleep. Some were chatting in the mess hall about trivial matters, like Wolf or Sick, and others were

jotting down who knows what in their notebooks, like Javier or Kiara. Zara and I were sitting on the mess hall floor, back to back with our weapons resting beside us. She struggled to stay awake, and I watched through one of the windows as the sky fell apart.

Kyd was also in the mess hall, looking busy. Alone in a corner, he was writing who knows what or doing who knows what calculations in his notebook. Almost nervously, he twirled that pen in his hand while mercilessly scribbling on the page. He already seemed old from the moment I met him, but the war had aged him several years in just two. The gray hairs that could once be counted on his brown hair now covered almost his entire head, and what used to be just occasional bags under his eyes had turned into wrinkles themselves.

Sick gave him a quick glance – oh, right, I didn't mention it before. Sick, Allen, and Henry were the same person. Henry Allen, nicknamed 'Sick', was a doctor. A very good one, actually. I never knew the origin of his nickname, but those who

knew him better said he was a sick man. They didn't explain if it was about his personal tastes or something he had done in his youth, but everyone was clear that the guy was sick. He was somewhat shy and serious, yes, although I never saw him as strange. Of course, we didn't talk much either.

As I was saying, Sick gave Kyd a quick glance, and the latter almost instinctively got up while tucking his notebook into his uniform. I saw him approach Moser, who was drinking tea in a corner, to whisper something in his ear and then retreat to who knows where. Sick followed him with his gaze until his eyes could no longer see him. Noticing that I was watching, he turned to me and gave me an incomplete smile; incomplete due to the missing teeth, which he had lost in a confrontation a few months ago. I didn't pay it much mind.

I looked back out the window and closed my eyes.

The next thing I remember is a flash coming through the window, its light

reaching my eyes even through my eyelids. Then, an explosion that didn't even allow us to hear the command voices. Zara's tap on my shoulder, my hands grabbing the rifle...

. . .

I kicked Evans' corpse to get him off me. Some explosion, or some bullet, had split his head open from the left jaw to the parietal. Next to him lay Mayer, a girl who also belonged to the assault team, motionless with her chest and abdomen drenched in red. I think I saw them for just half a second, although I could swear it felt like hours.

We were still inside the mess hall. We had no electricity anymore, and only the fire and the gunfire allowed us occasional glimpses of each other's faces. Moser was shouting orders we couldn't hear as we hugged our weapons, taking cover behind the walls and praying that the enemies wouldn't think to throw a grenade.

Whenever we could, we returned fire, unable to know if any of our bullets hit the mark or not. Zara and Erica were each holding a corner of the mess hall, neither able to get an angle to shoot, so they anxiously awaited orders.

Someone grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the door opening where I was standing. It was Sick.

"Moser ordered us to leave the mess hall! Tell Zara!"

"How are we supposed to get out?!"

More gunfire. I gathered the courage to take a look outside.

The central square of the base was a chaos of insurgents, some armored vehicles, and fire. On the other side, in another building, there were more skirmishes between Amere and military personnel, although they no longer belonged to us, so to be completely honest, I didn't really care about them.

"There's support on the way! The English detachment in Lavis is coming to help us repel the attack!"

"What's the order?!"

"Run outside as soon as the enemy stops suffocating us! I've already told the others!"

I looked around and saw Moser moving away. I turned my gaze back to Sick and nodded.

"And then?!"

"Expand our options by covering more ground!"

It was, to say the least, a strange order. Simply leaving the moderate security provided by the mess hall was, in my view, a bad idea. Just running without a clear destination? We would end up opening fire on each other in such darkness. There was still the problem that it was still raining outside, which would further

complicate communications and visibility.

An explosion shook the building. Not wanting to think about it anymore, I patted Sick's shoulder and ran towards Zara by the shortest path, darting through the death cones of the doors and crawling under the windows. When I reached her, she helped me up, and I leaned over her to shout in her ear.

"When I run, you follow!"

"What?!"

"What I just said!"

"Run where?! Why?!"

"Just do it! It's Moser's orders!"

"Alez!"

Another explosion. The noise reverberated loudly enough inside the room to leave my ears ringing. I saw Zara's lips moving, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. Suddenly, she froze and stared at a fixed point in space behind me. Her eyes widened, her cheeks paled,

and her striking eyebrows arched outward. She placed a hand on my chest and gripped my jacket tightly, although she didn't seem to even remember I was there. In one motion, I turned to see what was in that direction.

Wolf and Roa dragging Magiera's body and dropping it against the wall. I couldn't see his face. He didn't have a face anymore. Magiera and Zara had been a team until that day. I didn't talk much with the guy, but I knew Zara and him were good friends, so it didn't surprise me that Zara went blank seeing him dead.

I took her by the chin and made her look at me, partially taking advantage of her state of shock.

"If we don't move, we'll end up like him!"

She didn't manage to respond, only nodding very slowly before lowering her head. I stopped trying to return fire; it was clear it wasn't worth it. I stayed hidden

with Zara behind the wall, waiting for the signal that support had finally arrived. I... I know someone else died, someone from our team, but... sorry, I can't remember who it was. It's been too many years.

After a few minutes, the intensity of the fire on us decreased, and Sick, who was still waiting in the same place where he communicated Moser's orders to me, shouted with all his strength something like 'Now!'. I repeated the shout to Zara and ran out of the mess hall.

Just as the medic had predicted, the support had arrived, and Amere was no longer focused on us but on those two helicopters approaching from the north, firing their machine guns towards the center of the base as the storm drowned out the noise of their rotors. I also saw new troops approaching, wearing a uniform I had seen before. Although those infantry soldiers entered through the diametrically opposite entrance to ours, which still left us alone against the insurgents' attacks.

I ran. Zara ran right behind me, and out of the corner of my eye, I also saw Freak, Roa, and Sick running out. But... not everyone came out. Not everyone followed the order. I didn't even see Kyd or Moser come out. We managed to circle around the building and descend a slight slope that later turned into a forest.

I remember Roa's guttural shout.

"What about the others?!"

"I don't know, something must have stopped them!"

"Then we have to go back!"

"Going back through the same place is asking to get killed!"

"Are we going to leave them alone?!"

Sick intervened in Roa and Freak's discussion, being the one who would take command if only the rest of us were left.

"Let's stick to the order! The others will do the same as soon as the situation

allows!"

"They won't even be able to get out on their own!"

"Then go back on your own, Roa! I won't stop you, but you'll be the one to explain to Kyd why you disobeyed a direct order in such a critical situation!"

Roa fell silent, his wide lips wavering slightly, but Sick didn't seem satisfied yet. He walked up to him, and despite being shorter, he managed to impose himself almost effortlessly.

"We've lost seven soldiers in just minutes, Roa! Shut your mouth and follow the damn order if you don't want to be the eighth!"

No one said a word. We didn't have time to waste arguing either.

Behind us, the base; ahead, a vast expanse of trees. I felt my boots sinking into the mud, and my ears overwhelmed by explosions, gunfire, screams, and rain.

"I'll go one way! Heart and Alez the other! Roa and Freak, go through the center!"

"How far do we run?!"

"As far as you can! Now, go!"

I didn't want to stay and argue. I didn't want to stay and fight.

Without thinking about being the best soldier, without thinking about being the most obedient, I took Zara's hand and ran. Many had died. Many... comrades had fallen. Only at that moment, when we were no longer under immediate mortal danger, did my head spin enough to fully grasp the situation we were in.

Seven people with whom we had shared the last 4 years, first training and then facing terrorists side by side, had died in

less than an hour. Seven lives. Seven life stories that could no longer be told in their full reality. I myself kicked Evans' corpse away from between my legs, pushing him aside as if he were a dirty rag. What about their parents? I knew Evans had a daughter, whom he occasionally talked about. He had even shown me a photo of her once, with a proud smile that I could never muster. Did all of that no longer matter? Would it be the same if Zara and I fell? Who, if not me, would kneel before David's mother to tell her about her son's last moments?

I ran. Almost dragging Zara along. I ignored the trees like someone running through cobwebs. The night was only circumstantial; darkness wouldn't stop me.

The more I thought about those comrades who had lost their lives, the faster I moved. Mayer had once told me she liked my eyes. Just that, nothing more than that. Her selfless smile, which she occasionally showed, rested in the forefront of my memories. I saw her lying there, bleeding out until her pupils lost

their shine, and I couldn't do anything. Magiera wasn't my friend, he wasn't someone I commonly talked to, but any friend of Zara's was also my friend. Zara entrusted her life to Magiera even more than she did to me. How could I convince her to run by my side if she didn't trust me as much as she trusted him?

It condemned us both. I was inadequate. I wasn't a specialist of any kind. Just an assault guy, probably the most mediocre of all. I knew nothing. I never took interest in anything. I never wanted to learn anything. If things turned against us, Zara and I would end up dead. Just like with David, I would watch Zara die before my eyes, utterly powerless and with a shattered soul. My soul... was shattered. It's shattered. Even though Angelique is my anchor now, she merely holds what's left of me. Because most of my being died in France, and the second-largest part died in Italy.

"A-Alez, please...".

As I understand it now, Zara had been insisting for a while that she wanted to slow down, but my clouded thoughts decided to ignore her. I stopped abruptly, feeling her chest collide with my back. When I turned to look at her, I let out a pained sigh.

"What's wrong?"

"We... we're far enough, Alez...".

I lifted my head, and it wasn't a lie, not even the base was in sight, just trees. Trees and more trees. The terrain was sloping, and it seemed to become steeper as we progressed.

"Do you think you can go a bit further?"

"W-why, Alez?"

"They told us we needed to expand our options...".

"How much longer, Alez? Alez, please, just... realize it for yourself...".

"What...?".

Zara's damp hands held my cheeks, and she forced me to look into her eyes. Even today, I can't understand if the drops at the sides of her eyes were tears or rain.

"Alez... we were ordered to flee. The order was to escape, to escape however we can".

"...".

"Moser must have wanted us to just run away, to try to save ourselves".

"But it's-".

"He didn't order us to defend anything, didn't tell us to regroup at a certain point, or provide any kind of support. If we had a chance to save ourselves, he would have ordered us to help the English. He set us free, Alez. He wanted to save us".

When the underlying meaning of what Zara said became clear to me, I couldn't help but swallow hard and tense my

muscles.

"We... have to go back".

"What for, Alez? To go back there and get shot? Like Evans? Like Mayer? Like Magiera? Alez, it's...".

"Kyd is still there! Moser is still there! Erica is still there!".

"They must be dead by now!".

Zaralyne's fingers squeezed me tightly. It wasn't so evident at that moment, but her words hurt more coming from her mouth than reaching my ears.

"They must...".

"...".

"There's nothing left for us, Alez. I... I'm going to run, Alez. I'm going to respect Moser's last decision and I'm going to survive. I won't stop you if... you want to go back, but...".

I wanted to respond hastily, but the cold

burning my throat forced me to clear it and take a second longer to think. I looked into Zara's eyes, and then behind her... we were alone, lost at the edge of that forest. Even though we couldn't see the base or the fire anymore, everything could still be heard perfectly. There were still gunshots, still explosions, still screams. I glanced up and saw the two helicopters from before, this time retreating along the same aerial route they had approached from. I could only think that they had taken too much damage in such a short time to continue providing support. Who knows? Perhaps the ground troops had also started to withdraw. Once again, that would leave our platoons alone.

"... splitting from Sick and the rest was a mistake. We would have much more chances of surviving all together".

"I couldn't see where they went".

"Me neither...".

Both Zara and I calmed down. The rain

wasn't so bothersome under all those tall, dense trees. Her hands stopped squeezing my head and lost strength, slowly sliding down to rest on my shoulders, just before moving to gently grasp my jacket again.

"Even if you say you want to run, Zara... we don't have any kind of plan".

I tacitly made it clear to her that I was going to stay with her, and although I noticed some relief in the way she returned my gaze, there was no trace of anything even remotely resembling a smile on her damp face.

"We should try to find the others. We've been running for about ten minutes, I don't think they're too far".

"Not in these conditions. We could still run into Roa and Fred if we head west".

"Roa didn't want to leave. Those two... maybe they're arguing right now, as we speak".

"Yeah... let's go, let's not waste any

time".

Fred was Freak's name. Fred Ackermann.

I took Zara's hand again and changed our route. We didn't start running; we decided not to waste all our energy rushing through such difficult terrain. Instead, we walked briskly, adjusting our direction every few meters.

Every few feet, one of us would look back, terrified at the thought of someone following us.

"How's your ammo, Alez? I didn't fire a single shot".

"Two and a half magazines, or something like that. It should be enough to fire while retreating. The idea isn't to confront anyone, just keep running as long as the storm allows".

"And...".

"I don't know".

Though there was no question, Zara understood what my answer referred to. Neither of us had any idea what we would do after escaping. Assuming we lived to see another day, the next morning we would be enemies of the entire planet. If an Amere squad found us, they would open fire instantly, just like if it were a foreign army with which we couldn't justify our presence in those violent lands. If our own forces found us, we risked being executed for treason if Moser's order was legitimate.

We had no radio, and of course, we hadn't been deployed with our cell phones.

I spoke quietly as I helped Zara jump over a large water hole that had formed in a small clearing.

"We could... hide in a building or an uninhabited house and get new clothes".

"For what?".

"If we also leave our weapons, we might get lucky approaching a military base and pretending to be civilians".

"That's not believable, Alez".

"Do you have a better idea?".

"No... I can't think of anything".

We had already left the previous slope, and the terrain was flat, despite the complexity of walking it.

"They're going to take us as deserters, Zara. We can't-".

"Wait".

She stepped forward to stand in front of me and placed a hand on my shoulder. Her eyes cautiously moved from the front to the right, until I saw her raise her head slightly.

"Don't you hear it, Alez?".

"Hear what?".

Only then did I notice that the noise of the previous battle no longer reached us, although I don't know if that was because

the combat had ended or if we were already too far away.

"It's... it's water. Running water. Right, there was a river around here, wasn't there?".

"The Adige".

"Let's go".

"Wait, why do you want to go to the river?".

I took her arm when she began to walk away, and she looked me up and down with that confidence that characterized her.

"It's precisely something like the river that can expand our options, Alez. We'll have more visibility and-".

Any plan or idea that was arising from that brief exchange came to an end when our eardrums were once again alerted by the roar of a firearm. There were at least

three automatic weapons, probably rifles.

"Those are...".

I didn't let Zara finish speaking. For the third time that night, I took her hand and ran towards the gunfire.

"Roa and Freak! Amere must have found them!".

Zaralyne had been the one who wanted to run away without looking back, forgetting about the others, but she didn't oppose the idea of rescuing our comrades from a likely superior enemy. We sprinted almost in desperation in search of both our allies and the hostiles. The icy rain burned my neck, and although my eyes had already gotten used to it, the darkness made every step difficult.

We sneaked through what almost resembled a wall of trees, and we saw it clearly: a small plain stretched out and rose about twenty meters ahead, turning

into a small plateau; by then, I could also hear the sound of running water. Above it, we saw two human figures lying behind a fallen tree. One seemed to be reloading their weapon, while the other returned fire in very short bursts against an enemy that wasn't visible from our position. It was Roa and Freak. One of them saw us and considered aiming at us until the other hit him on the shoulder, recognizing us.

We didn't hesitate for a second to climb up to them, crawling the last half of the way to avoid being hit by any stray bullets.

Everything was so, so dark, even outside the forest. Only the constant, relentless lightning allowed us to see the tangled, exhausted looks of the others. I felt Roa's hand pulling my clothes towards him, making room for me behind that large, solitary trunk that had been torn from its roots by the voracious wind.

"What are you doing here?".

"We heard the shots! Did Amere find you?".

"It's just a patrol, but these bastards never travel alone!".

Freak returned fire, almost oblivious to our conversation. Both his eyes and his hair faded into the nocturnal darkness. Zara intervened.

"We have to go, Roa! There's nothing more we can do!".

"What?! We have orders to-!".

"Don't be foolish! Look around you, you're alone! How long do you think we can hold out with just the four of us by the time reinforcements from that patrol arrive?".

"B-but-!".

"Heart is right, Marco!".

Freak crouched behind cover, addressing his good friend: Marco Roa. Also, he patted my shoulder and pointed to the other side of the trunk. Of course, I immediately understood the gesture. I

raised myself as little as possible to avoid exposing myself, and... honestly, without the faintest idea of where the terrorists were, I mimicked Freak and his short bursts.

I couldn't hear what my comrades were saying, and I couldn't see them to deduce whether they reached an agreement or not.

From up there, it was easier to get an idea of the geographical position where we were. Behind us, the slope descended, and we returned to the forest. On our left, only trees and more trees. On the other side, another slope descended, meeting a road that stretched into the distance, covered by two extensive patches of forest and more forest. On our right, the plateau we were on abruptly turned into a cliff only a few meters high that led directly to the overgrown Adige River.

The river was agitated, violent, and uncontrollable, rushing southward, carrying tons of water that would eventually flow into the Adriatic Sea.

A bullet hit the trunk. Just one. Just one,

in all the time I was suppressing them.

I dropped behind the tree and patted Freak, who continued his task.

"Did they reach an agreement?".

"Yes, we're leaving!".

Zara confirmed the response I hoped to hear and clung to me. Her left hand grabbed the collar of my jacket with a force I rarely felt from her. She pulled me towards her, and for a few seconds, I felt her cheek resting against mine, then receiving the warmth of her breath in my ear.

"Alez... they don't know about our escape. They want to return to base. So, when we're back, you and I will separate from them and...".

Her voice was filled with doubt. Doubt, and perhaps a little fear. I crossed my hand behind her back and took her hair to pull her away from me, bringing our foreheads

together so I could look her in the eyes.

"... you don't need to say anything. We both know what comes next."

I could barely feel her extremely imperceptible nod before hearing Freak's voice.

"EVERYONE GET DOWN!"

It wasn't his fault, of course... but his shout came too late.

Before Zara and I could stop staring into each other's eyes, an explosion left our ears ringing. I remember falling to the ground, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the sheer potential energy finish splitting the trunk in two, after some homemade explosive blast had weakened it enough. The four of us were intact, although I saw Roa clutching his right arm as tightly as he could. One half of the tree spun downward, leaving Freak and me completely exposed to enemy fire, just

praying that the elevation of the terrain would make it a bit harder for Amere's patrol, who mercilessly opened fire on us. My companion threw himself behind what remained of the trunk, although half of his body was unprotected due to the lack of space, while I, purely on instinct, crawled away from the piece of wood that could only protect the other three. All I could hear was my breathing, and the rubbing of my clothes against each other as I desperately moved toward the edge of the cliff; I couldn't hide. One of my hands slipped and threatened to take me with it into the void. Below... the water flowed and flowed.

I stopped, knelt on the ground, and looked in Zara's direction. I still couldn't hear anything. Coming to her senses after the previous daze, she looked in my direction and... made an expression I had never seen on her before.

She gestured twice to approach me, but Roa grabbed her arm to stop her.

I...

I was completely exposed to enemy fire. It was only a matter of seconds before one of all those inaccurate shots hit my skull. The foot on the same side as the knee I put on the ground was hanging over the river.

No matter how I looked at it, I had nothing to do.

Zara was screaming, but I couldn't hear her. In complete hopelessness, she screamed and screamed with fury and sadness, tearing her throat apart to get her message across, whatever it was.

The human mind is... curious.

How many times have I said that already?

I wasn't scared, I guess I was too dazed to be. Strangely, at that moment, all I could pay attention to was Zaralyne's face.

Zara...

Zara, my dear friend, my precious companion.

A loud thunderclap sounded, untapping my ears.

Apparently oblivious to it, Zara broke

free from Roa's grip and fell to her knees and hands on the grass, exposing herself while finally managing to communicate what she wanted to convey to me.

"JUMP, ALEZ! JUMP!".

Jump? Jump where? Towards her? It was a bad idea. Several meters separated us; I wouldn't be able to cover them with just one jump. Plus, there was no space; it would have been counterproductive. If Zara told me to jump, I assumed she must have been referring to...

...

The whole world stopped spinning.

It wasn't a sensation; for exactly a second and a half, the world stopped spinning. Raindrops ceased to fall, a single lightning bolt froze in the sky, creating a permanent light that allowed me to see everything perfectly. Bullets halted halfway, shots ceased, and casings remained suspended,

unable to hit the ground. The water below me stopped flowing; Zara stopped screaming.

Zara...

Only two things, in that paused world, continued their course. Those things were Zara, and the bullet that killed her.

In the foreground, I saw her face violently twisted to the right, the result of a projectile impacting the left side of her head. The hand that had been reaching out to me lost all strength and hit the ground with the limpness of a puppet whose strings had been cut. Less than an instant later, the rest of her body followed the same path, and I saw her head bounce against the ground before ceasing to move, forever. Roa and Fred had disappeared; they no longer existed. Just like the trunk, and the bullets, and the grass, and the trees, and the rain, and the plateau, and the enemies, and...

My entire world turned black.

There was no more black and white; just black.

Why did Zara die? Who was to blame this time? I know David perished due to my own incompetence, but Zara... I can't fully blame myself for Zara's death. And yet, despite saying this, and knowing that her death doesn't weigh on my shoulders entirely... why does remembering her cause me as much, if not more, pain than remembering David? Several times I've shed tears, alone in my room, thinking of Zara, of her smile, of those dark eyes that could pierce through me and understand everything I wanted without me having to say a word. Zara...

Damn it, Zara... Why did this have to happen to us? Why were we born in such a difficult time? I... I can say today that my only wish is that the three of us had been born much earlier, or, with some hope, much later. All I wanted was for us to go out together to see a movie that David would probably choose and that Zara and I wouldn't enjoy, but... that would have been the least of it. As long as I could be with you two, everything would have been fine. Everything would have been fine.

Yes... yes, everything would have been fine. And now I'm here, in my room, hiding from Angelique while I write this. Of course I'm hiding; I can't show myself to her like this, not when I now occupy in her life the role that I once felt you two occupied in mine.

How am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to do? I want to cry, I want to drink, and I want to pass out. And... do you know the worst part, Zara, David? That I wouldn't change what we lived through for anything, because deep down in my soul, I know that all this suffering I feel daily is insignificant compared to how happy I was with you two.

Or...

Maybe...

It's just the memories that make me think this.

I don't know...

...

Let me go back.

Despite being soaked through, I felt my

throat dry, and, as if it were a defense mechanism of my own conscience, I remembered the last thing Zara said to me: 'Jump'.

Of course, she must have meant that.

'If I jump, I'll probably drown. But even so, my chances of survival are higher than being under a relentless hail of bullets.' Yes, Zara was right. If I wanted to live...

I let myself fall.

I let myself fall, and the last thing I saw was the lifeless body of Zaralyne Heart, my best friend, bleeding out on a land we should never have set foot on.

Although I didn't stop breathing, that was my death.

Alez died there, in Trento, Italy. The last of me, of my being, gave its final breath in that fall. The man who touched the river was no longer the same. It was... someone else. It was me, the me who writes this today.

. . .

As the shock subsided, the rain had already stopped.

I found myself on a mound of earth, trapped amidst a heap of bushes. My face turned towards the sky, although a bridge obscured half of what my eyes could see. Water soaked my feet, but I wasn't injured. In fact... I was unscathed. I couldn't tell whether the river had carried me while conscious or not, but when I came to at that stop, it didn't feel like I was just waking up.

I turned around and crawled a few meters upward until I felt safe enough on solid ground.

Little did I know then, but I had been brought to Nomi.

David's AUG was nowhere to be found. I had lost it. There was no longer a letter to deliver to David's mother, and there was no burden tying me to the past. My right hand caressed the 92 still resting on my thigh.

The sky was still cloudy, but it seemed to

want to clear.

It all came back to me.

Once again, I relived the last thing my former self witnessed.

Zara...

I felt tears welling up in my eyes... but I shut them, refusing to let a single one escape.

After a while, I stood up.

I looked around... Nomi was a ghost town.

The next steps were obvious.

First, find food, and second, find shelter.

After that...

What I had to do next was...

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